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**Editing the Novel
to Foster Success
and Profit**

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by Julia Houston, PhD

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Introduction

We may be our own worst critics, but we are most definitely our own worst editors. We're usually pretty lousy editors for our friends and family too.

Editing a novel is a challenge in being both authoritative and subservient, insightful and indifferent. The best editors have no emotional involvement in the work. They forgive nothing, they assume nothing, and, while they are tactful, they tell the author what is right and what is wrong without apology.

If you have written a book and want to be your own editor, can you really get that detached from your own writing? Can you truly bring an objective eye to a story written by your child or your good friend?

Probably, but it takes practice and discipline. It takes bringing different tools to different tasks. It takes being able to guide the author without becoming a co-author. And it takes knowing your grammar really, really well.

As the market for self-publishing on the Internet grows, the role of the personally contracted editor is growing as well. Many authors are bypassing the lengthy submission-editing-revision-proofing journey of traditional print publication and offering their work for sale on Amazon and other e-publishing sites. The contracted editor is becoming the "beta reader," the work's first real test subject, an objective audience that can help the author to success and profit.

When to edit

First write, then edit.

While most of us self-correct as we write, you should at least finish the first draft before showing it to an editor. Bringing an editor, or an editing frame of mind, into the process too soon can kill both creativity and motivation. You should attain a sense of completion and accomplishment so that you are ready for an editor's contributions. And don't forget that the editor can only work on what you have, not what you're going to have.

I have only ever "fired" a client once. He sent me his novel, and I worked on it for several days before I got a "revised" version of the novel to work on instead, a version that had very little in common with the so-called "completed" first draft.

I explained to the client that I needed a version that was complete enough to receive useful comments and proofreading, or he was wasting his time and money. His response was surprise that I expected to be paid for my work on the first draft because the second version was "really the novel."

Buh-bye.

However, it's also a mistake to bring in the editor too late in the game. You should not wait until the book feels ready for publication as further work may make you feel frustrated.

Remember that editing almost always leads to revision and that presenting a book full of mistakes is the best way not to impress an agent or publisher. A good editor works with the author's future input in mind and may offer their suggestions more than once during the writing process.

What does the fiction writer want from the professional editor?

Consciously, the author wants help with their grammar and typos and to have an evaluation of the quality of the work: whether the novel is good or bad and why it is good or bad.

Unconsciously, authors want praise and education. They want the editor to love their work and to tell them how to make it a bestseller.

While you can't blame the author for wanting the key to fame and fortune, any editor who actually knows how to be that successful is counting their money on a beach somewhere and paying someone else to answer their email.

The professional editor should provide proofing, evaluation, praise, education, and help with the market, but within realistic expectations.

What does it really mean to edit a novel?

So much goes into editing a novel that trying to come up with the usual "job description" paragraph leaves too many questions, particularly in the *degree* of responsibilities. Instead, let's approach the editor's job through do's and don't's.

Top Ten Do's

1. Correct 99.99% of grammar/mechanical errors
2. Correct and standardize format
3. Highlight strengths
4. Guide the author to specific improvements
5. Make helpful suggestions for future work on the piece
6. Be transparent
7. Explain issues of genre, audience, and market
8. Define standards of professionalism
9. Provide signposts to success
10. Read from a distance

Top Ten Don't's

1. Co-author
2. Offer to do more work for free
3. "Inspire genius"
4. Point out each and every instance of a recurring, non-grammatical problem
5. Check out mentally because the work isn't that great

6. Use humor
7. Contradict the work without support
8. Cut-and-paste generic comments
9. Fail to acknowledge when you use personal taste
10. Blatantly lie

Let's take these one at a time, starting with the do's.

1. Do: Correct 99.99% of grammar/mechanical errors

Most people's concept of an editor's job is "proofreader," and clients will be most displeased if they find errors you have missed.

There is no question but that a professional editor must have an impressive mastery of grammar, mechanicals, formats, and styles. Knowledge, however, is not enough. The lament I hear most often from authors is, "I've read this and read this, and I keep finding mistakes."

When the brain expects something it does not get, it will fill in the blanks. Take the following example:

A B C

Is that middle figure a B or a 13? If you're like 99% (or so) of the people out there, you saw a B at first glance. And you're supposed to. If our brains didn't fill in the

gaps of information in our lives, we literally could not survive.

The #1 handicap of the author who tries to be their own editor is that our brains know what we are trying to say. If you leave a word out of a sentence, or letters out of a word, your brain will helpfully supply the missing pieces.

Consider:

John loved Daisy more than he loved apple pie, even though sometimes he worried Dasy wasn't being faithful or paying attention to what really wanted in life.

Did you fill in the missing "he" in the sentence and the missing "i" in "Dasy"? Probably. Would you fill those in if you had written the sentence? Possibly.

If you're doing your own work, or editing a work you've read before, I can offer two good tricks. First, try reading the novel backwards. This might be sentence by sentence or paragraph by paragraph. This way you'll be breaking up the context, getting rid of those pesky expectations that fill in those pesky blanks.

The second trick is to figure out the most common mistakes by the author and search for them specifically. Does the author keep spelling "heir" as "hair" or sticking commas in after conjugations instead of before them? Run a search on those mistakes.

Here are some searches I run on most documents as a matter of course:

- More then / less then (should be more than / less than)
- ". (should be ".")
- Its' (never correct)
- First hand (should be firsthand)
- Different than (should be different from)

Some special factors arise when editing a document where the author's first language is not English. While ESL authors have pretty straight-forward problems with grammar, complications arise with idioms. Many a grammatically correct

sentence just plain sounds weird. In such cases, the editor has to make a judgment call on whether the sentence in question is a stylistic flourish of the author or simply a lack of knowledge about how English-speaking people talk.

For example:

- They shouted at the top of their voices.
 - This is most likely a messed-up idiom. Should read: They shouted at the top of their lungs.
- The moonlight shone as happiness.
 - Weird, but kind of cool. Leave it alone.
- Jill was nothing more than skin and flesh.
 - This is most likely a messed-up idiom. Should read: Jill was nothing more than skin and bones.

Remember that the author can always reject an editorial suggestion. If you think they're trying to sound like a native speaker, go ahead and tell them the usual way to turn the phrase. They can stick with their original sentence if they want to.

2. Do: Correct and standardize format

This is pretty simple, thank goodness. Unlike screenplays and dissertations, novel formatting can reflect a great deal of creativity. It's helpful to remember that they're called "novels" because they were a new way of telling a story in England in the late 18th century. They were not a play, a poem, an essay, or anything seen before.

So while there are some basics, the primary concern usually isn't whether the novel is formatted correctly, but whether it is formatted *consistently*. If there is a double break between scenes, there should always be a double break in such cases, not a triple break or a row of asterisks. If italics set off special comments by the narrator, then italics should always set off special comments by the narrator.

What? I should list the basics of various formats stuff? Come on. There are a hundred Websites out there telling you how to do a title page, headers, and

chapter headings. Editors should have these all memorized. Professional editors should have a few books on it in their library.

Standard works include *Formatting & Submitting Your Manuscript*, by Chuck Sambuchino, (2009) and *Formatting & Submitting Your Manuscript*, by Cynthia Laufenberg, (2004).

3. Do: Highlight strengths

This is vital, yet it can be easier to spot weaknesses than to recognize strengths.

You must remind yourself that the author is a person and no one likes being trashed. Besides, no one who has spent the time to commit so many words to paper is completely lacking in authorial strengths.

Often your best bet for finding something good is to notice a negative reaction. Are you irritated that a character died? That might mean the author did a good job making that character likable. Do you find yourself wincing whenever a scene changes? That might mean the author is doing a good job of setting up a scene, but needs to work on making each scene pay off.

As always, use emotions with care. Above all, the editor must recognize the value of the author's aim, regardless of whether it matches up with the editor's own values. Everything that furthers the author's intended message is a strength, and whatever detracts from their aim is a weakness.

Has the author written a book with the intention of showing how Christians can save the world? Christian characters who demonstrate strong morals are a plus.

Are the author's Christian characters supposed to be ruining all the fun for the rest of the world? Christian characters who are annoying are strengths.

Is the moral of the novel supposed to be:

- That women would be happier if they gave up their silly notions of having a career?

- That Democrats are the last bastion of civilization?
- That FDR was a lousy President?
- That animal cruelty should be a capital offense?
- That tough guys don't dance?

Evaluate the work accordingly.

It is never the editor's job to agree with the author's message, only to see that the message is conveyed to the reader.

Finally, don't forget about the more ineffable aspects of a good read. Letting your emotional responses guide you once more, speak up if the author provides a particularly nice bit of writing.

F. Scott Fitzgerald's highly distinct and luscious prose hits several high notes in his masterpiece, *The Great Gatsby*. If I had been his editor, I would have particularly raved over this bit where the unescorted women at a party are called "gypsies":

Suddenly one of these gypsies, in trembling opal, seizes a cocktail out of the air and dumps it down for courage and, moving her hands like Frisco, dances out alone on the canvas platform. A momentary hush; the orchestra leader varies his rhythm obligingly for her, and there is a burst of chatter as the erroneous news goes around that she is Gilda Gray's understudy from the "Follies." The party has begun.

Bravo!

4. Do: Guide the author to specific improvements

Since this section could be a paper – or a book -- all on its own, let's focus on the

most practical aspect: making a checklist. As you gather experience as an editor, you will develop your own checklist that best helps you to cover all the bases.

To begin, all fiction editors' checklists must at least include the following four areas:

I. Show, don't tell

I have seen one problem above all others in the work of new fiction writers: they have seen many more movies and TV shows than they have read books. This is most evident in that they tend to tell stories rather than show them. This basic tenet of writing fiction, "Show, don't tell," is both quite simple and infinitely complex.

Basically, "Show, don't tell," means that a fiction writer is not a reporter. The reader is not simply to be informed, as in being told, "Helen was sad." Instead, the writer should show that Helen is sad with expressive details and dialog that allow the reader to experience the character's emotion.

If you think about it, the same is true in plain old daily life. If a friend came up to you and muttered, "Hey, I'm sad," you probably wouldn't react very strongly. Also, if the friend ran up to you, threw themselves in your arms, and burst into tears, you might feel a bit put off.

Translated to the novel, we might have a narrator who simply notes that the character is sad or one who goes into lengthy detail about every aspect of the character's sadness. In the first instance, we don't care, and in the second we are bored and we don't care.

If, however, what you read makes you feel you are standing beside Helen while she sheds tears at the funeral of her mother -- smelling the roses on the coffin, feeling the bite of a cold morning wind on your legs despite the bright sun, listening to your friend's quietly broken breath not quite drowned out by the chanting of the priest -- you would be more likely to become emotionally engaged.

This is what good fictional writing does. It gives the reader sharp, specific details, allowing them to experience their emotional reactions as they read and draw their own conclusions from those reactions.

It is valuable for the editor to say that the story feels "told" rather than "shown," but the more specific you can be about the cause, the more valuable your input.

Stories that are told, not shown are often:

- over-explained
- lack imagery (especially imagery that isn't visual)
- summarize action
- explicitly command the reader to feel specific emotions

They also tend to over-direct action and dialog, trying to describe every detail the author sees on the movie screen in their mind. A tell-tale error here is littering the dialog with boldface, capitals, and ellipses to...force the reader...to FEEL the...character's...**PASSION!!**

Most pervasively, an author who writes a novel as though it's a movie often narrates from multiple perspectives, jumping back and forth from character to narrator to another character without regard for the reader's disorientation. In film, the camera may hop about, acting as the director's "eye" as it narrows our focus to various aspects of the story. The fiction narrator is a voice, and the tone of that voice, as well as every change in that tone, must have meaning for the reader.

For example, Isabel Johnson is driving her car. We are shown by a straight-forward, third-person narrator that the road is wet, the car's heater isn't working, and the radio is only playing late-night talk shows. Then we are told, "Little did Isabel know that her whole life was about to change."

This ham-fisted foreshadowing comes from a dramatic change in narrative voice that takes the reader out of the scene. Rather than feeling worried about Isabel, the reader is more likely to wonder just who is suddenly talking to them.

II. Quality of plot and characters

Simply put: is the plot enjoyable, and do you like (or enjoy disliking) the characters?

Less simply, you need to identify specific elements of the plot and characters that

do or don't work.

Some things to consider in the plot:

- Is the concept interesting? Fresh? Stale?
- Is the pace too fast or slow?
- Are there glaring plot holes?
- Are there unresolved issues that are not being purposefully left for a sequel?
- Are events too predictable? Too confusing?

Some things to consider in the characters:

- Do all the characters seem basically the same?
- Do you understand the characters' motivations?
- Is a character a dull stereotype?
- Does the hero manifest abilities on demand?
- Is the villain just a big meanie for no reason?

If you want further direction in creating your checklist, read book reviews or just talk with people who read fiction about what they like.

III. Quality of Prose

In addition to grammar and mechanics, a good editor should address prose quality.

Primarily, this includes issues of style.

- Does the author choose their words well?
- Are they wordy?
- Do they have way too many adverbs?
- Do their sentences and paragraphs go on and on?
- Do they use too much passive voice?
- Do they keep using the same sentence structure?

The standard, commonsense reference here continues to be Strunk & White's *Elements of Style*.

IV. Research

Many fiction writers, especially those writing in genre, are lazy about the details. If you're reading about how the sheriff and his posse are tracking the bad guys across the plains, you expect – and deserve – an accurate description of how to track someone across the plains. If the chief petty officer is going about his "daily duties" on a US Navy ship, you're going to want to know what those duties are beyond just "writing in his log" and "walking the decks."

Fortunately, it's not the editor's job to do the missing research, only to point out that the novel could benefit from more informed exposition. A few times I have suggested the author might not have their facts completely straight include claims that:

- Circular objects have an easier time maintaining a stable orbit of earth.
- Plants grow towards the sun because it's warmer than the shade.
- The Congressional Congress wanted to ban alcohol, but they all had to wait until Prohibition.

5. Do: Make helpful suggestions for future work on the piece

- Should the novel be part of a series?
- Is there a sub-plot that needs to be fleshed out?
- Does a character just disappear?
- Does a relationship start off with promise then get ignored?
- Is the author's message only half-achieved?
- Does the ending feel rushed?

Again, the vital issue is not to take over the work and dictate the way you would like it to be, but only to point out paces where the author starts something they do not finish or can finish better.

I once edited a novel with too many "round" characters. Several characters had enough exposition to be a main character, which meant that a character would appear, get pages of backstory, say a couple lines, and then disappear. It was clear the author intended to use them in subsequent novels in the series.

I suggested that the exposition for several of the characters could wait until the novel where they would actually do something of interest.

6. Do: Be transparent

This is an odd guideline and one new editors may not like.

It is basic human nature to guard things for which we charge people, but what a professional editor provides is too precious to worry about being mysterious. In fact, explaining where and why and how an editor's comments arise should only make that commentary more valuable.

Some aspects of transparency are quite simple. If there's some dialog with grammatical mistakes and you aren't sure whether they're being done on purpose, go ahead and correct them then note in the comments that you don't know how well-spoken the character is supposed to be. The author can then use your corrections if they like or reject them if they're not helpful.

If a character is obviously supposed to be a poor speaker, but has dialog so bad you can't understand it, tell the author it's gotten to the point of gibberish.

If you can't figure out what they're saying, more casual readers are certainly going to have trouble.

Be honest when you don't know a colloquial expression. It may actually cross the line into parochial jargon no one will recognize outside the author's hometown or circle of friends (e.g., "devil's strip", "batcaver," and "LMAOROTFICW").

Honestly acknowledge when the "science" of the science-fiction doesn't make sense to you, as long as you give it a good try first. And be honest if you think there is just too much technical explanation for a general audience.

Even more importantly, be honest not just as an editor, but as a reader. Fess up (tactfully) when:

- You simply cannot work out the meaning of a sentence.
- The plot reminds you of another book/movie.
- The hero or narrator is a jerk/creep/idiot.

- That sex scene is not sexy.

Of course, these responses as a reader must be supported by analysis that speaks to the work, not to the editor's personal preferences.

For example, I edited a novel once that wasn't just sadistically graphic – there's a market for books about people being raped and dismembered, after all – but was also trying to be a thriller, such as Thomas Harris' *Silence of the Lambs* or Patricia Cornwell's *All that Remains*.

I wasn't personally delighted with the blood and sexual torture, and by acknowledging and then setting aside my personal taste, I could point out that the problem with this "thriller" was that not a single victim ever escaped the psycho-killer.

Basically, the novel had the incompetent cops standing around eating donuts while the bad guy hacked his way through a cast of perfectly nice people. It soon became obvious that no one would be saved, so there was no suspense. Once the killer set his sights on someone, the reader knew they were dead.

I commented that the novel lacked suspense, and thus the gore-and-destruction scenes lacked emotional impact. From there, I discussed the importance of the "ticking clock" in thriller novels, pointed out that there is no tension without hope.

Finally, I suggested that he pick a genre, thriller or slasher-horror, and then pointed out basic expectations for both choices.

7. Do: Explain issues of genre, audience, and market

Yes, we would all like to take the next Big Great Author under our wing, but money is the reality of art, and authors, especially unpublished authors, usually make the wise choice to write in genre to facilitate getting published.

If you want to be a professional editor, you have to know your popular literary genres. That means knowing their basic clichés, standards, limitations, and

histories.

Genres 101:

- Western
- Murder Mystery/Detective
- Contemporary Romance
- Historical Romance
- Buddy Cop
- Sci-Fi
- Thriller
- Steampunk
- Action-Adventure
- Quest Novel
- Fantasy (D&D)
- Inspirational
- True Crime
- Ghost Story
- Fable

If you don't know these genres, learn them and learn how to fit novels into their generic slots. An editor should be invaluable in distinguishing between a "fresh take" on a genre and pointing out when the genre is abandoned or ignored.

Once a reader identifies a genre – usually their first step in buying the novel, let alone reading it – they have specific expectations, and those expectations can be exceeded, but should never be disappointed.

For example, the most popular thriller right this second is the vampire thriller, which

is a subset of the gothic thriller, which is a subset, naturally, of the thriller. If you're editing a vampire thriller and find one of the characters irritating because he's all moody and mysterious, you need to curb the impulse to make a negative comment. Moody and mysterious vampires are all the rage, and the characterization is a strength, unless the author takes it to a ridiculous extreme.

On the other hand, you need to comment if you find that the vampire thriller you're editing lacks any thrill, fails to exploit the history of vampire legends, or ignores the seduction/destruction dynamic essential to the genre.

The editor should serve as a reminder that readers (and this particularly includes publishers and people downloading from the Internet) need assurance that they're going to get what they want. If they buy something entitled *Flames of Love's Fury* with a ripped bodice painted on the cover and don't get a bodice-ripper, they're going to be irritated.

And they should be! An editor must be able to point out the basic definitions of a genre, the general expectations of a genre, and the areas of the genre in which an author can play around if they want.

- Got a western that replaces horses with intelligent cars? *Great!*
Got a western where you can't tell the good guys from the bad for no particular reason? *Probably not so great.*
- Got a buddy cop novel that focuses on cold cases? *Great!*
Got a buddy cop novel where the cops don't actually become buddies? *Probably not so great.*
- Got a novel wanting to be sci-fi that avoids spaceships and ray-guns? *Great!*
- Got a novel wanting to be sci-fi that doesn't offer a single scientific explanation for the technology? *Definitely not so great.*

8. Do: Define standards of professionalism

This is probably the editor's most obvious task besides proofreading, but it's not quite as cut-and-dried as it seems. Fiction writing is a business, and all businesses have their standards. However, authors are allowed a great deal of liberty if there seems to be a point to whatever they're doing.

The literature is full of stories about outrageously inappropriate authors: novels submitted to publishers in longhand and wrapped in a McDonald's bag, R-rated cursing and graphic sex scenes in fiction intended for little children, novels that unintentionally insult the audience, stories that take forever to give the audience nothing in the way of thematic relevance, novels that reveal in the last few sentences that the characters are all giant lobsters.

But then...

- Novels with gibberish (James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*)
- Novels with more than one ending (John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*)
- Novels that only make sense when everything is a symbol (Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*)
- Novels told completely out of order (Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*)
- Novels about girly things with very little action (Jane Austin's *Pride and Prejudice*)
- Novels written like the author was high on something (Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*).

Occasionally, it's not so easy for the editor to distinguish between an author's inability to follow basic storytelling guidelines and an author's ability to write something truly fresh and wonderful.

As a writer, I have found the following rule helpful: learn the rules before you break them. Consequently, as an editor, I ask: *does this author seem to know the rules they're breaking?*

Let's take the most famous historical romance, *Gone with the Wind*, by Margaret Mitchell. She breaks the biggest rule of the genre by (gasp) not having the hero and heroine end the novel together, locked in each other's arms and promising forever. But she proves she knows what she's doing by having Scarlet vow to get

him back. Indeed, the promise of this sequel outlived the author and was finally "realized" fifty-five years later by Alexandra Ripley in *Scarlett*.

9. Do: Provide signposts to success

However valuable your specific comments are, they are worthless if they don't add up to a game plan. Some authors need only a little nip and tuck, but a long string of even the best suggestions can leave an author confused about the next step. It's usually best to define the goals of the work then tie the various suggestions to achieving them.

Often, however, an editor may face difficulty in figuring out just what a novel wants to do or to be. In such cases, bear in mind that, thank goodness, the editor needs only to point out issues and conflicts, not resolve them. In other words, we provide signposts to success, not a map.

For example, let's say we're editing a novel that seems to be a sort of retro cyberpunk thriller. Soon, however, we find many scenes devoted to complex character development and personal reflection, not exactly the hallmarks of classic cyberpunk. Then the whole thing ends with a big anti-technology lesson, which is the opposite of what the genre usually gives.

It is not our job to unify the different aspects of the novel or to fix what we think is broken. Except for the grammar and mechanics, we are there to diagnose problems, not to cure them.

In the above example, the signposts should point out the disparities in genre, construction, and theme, explaining carefully just what we see the problem to be. It is then the author's job to fix it or reject our suggestions.

10. Do: Read from a distance

Add up everything I have said in the first nine points, and it really all boils down to Point #10. The editor must evaluate the novel from every relevant perspective except the author's.

This is not only why an editor must never be a co-author, but also why an author who wants to self-edit has got to make the time to put the work aside for a while and think about other things before they put on their editing hat. It may take hours, days, or weeks before the author can come back to the novel with the proper emotional distance to be a good judge of the work and to forget enough about what each sentence is supposed to say to notice grammatical errors.

An editor must not root for the novel to be good, must not fill in the blanks, and absolutely must not step outside the boundaries of their job.

In other words...

What should the editor *not* do? Top Ten:

1. Don't: Co-author

Or be a ghost writer (unless you're being paid a great deal more). This in many ways presents one of the greatest challenges, but it is the simplest to understand. The editor is not the novel's co-partner or co-parent. It is not the editor's job to take over, only to point out what the author might like to do. Thus, the editor can foster greatness, but cannot co-create greatness.

This gets hard when the editor is "rooting" for the novel. You don't even have to know the author to start wanting the novel to succeed. Maybe you like a character. Maybe the plot is exciting. Maybe the book is set in your hometown.

This is where emotional distance is most vital. Whether the author is you, your friend, or a stranger, it is essential to read from the perspective of someone who does not care whether the novel succeeds or fails. One must maintain the attitude that only what is on the page matters, and only comments that promote the story towards its intended destination are helpful.

With all apologies to his fans, a good example for this problem is movie critic Gene Siskel. Far too often, Siskel would stop reviewing the movie he actually saw and

instead suggest the movie he would like to see instead.

Consider (randomly) the teen comedy *Gotcha* (1985). It's a basic coming-of-age story where Anthony Edwards likes to play a version of paintball and ends up having to survive real espionage. Instead of talking about whether the movie succeeds on its own merits, Siskel says:

And finally, Fiorentino as the spy, as in *Vision Quest*, once again proves to be an attractive conquest for an adolescent.

In fact, she is so appealing in her Nastassja Kinski-imitation accent and haircut that we often question why we have to sit through so many scenes involving the boy, his family back home and his best buddy in Europe, and so few scenes with Fiorentino.

Siskel here is making up his own "better version" of the film because he likes a character/actress and would rather see her than the hero. But the entire point of the film is that a young man is learning that life is hard. However attractive Siskel finds Fiorentino, complaining that she doesn't have enough screen time doesn't really speak to the purpose of the film. She is simply the love interest.

A novel is never wrong for not being what you want it to be, only for not being what the novel wants to be. When you find yourself dreaming up a better version of the story, you have allowed yourself to become too invested in the work.

If you can see where the novel wants to go, praise the author if it gets there. If it doesn't manage to get to the intended destination, then praise the author for their ambition and tell them what work needs to be done.

2. Don't: Offer to do more work for free

An editor should never start work without a clear understanding by both editor and author about just what amount of work is expected for just what amount of money. When the work is returned to the author as an edited piece, the work should be complete. Further work on the piece by the editor should be negotiated and paid for separately.

For instance, if the editor feels the entire final chapter should be revised, the editor still needs to edit the final chapter as is. Offering, "Hey, make the last chapter better and then I'll edit it for no additional cost" is not acceptable. Instead, one

should suggest the final chapter be revised and then remind the client they can return to the work for further editing at an additional, appropriate cost.

3. Don't: "Inspire genius"

An editor is not a coach, a buddy, a mentor, or a fan.

The relationship between author and editor is not to be breached on either side. Just as the author should never expect the editor to do work for free, the editor should never assume any role beyond their purview.

There are other ways of becoming mentally invested in a work beyond emotional involvement. It is all too easy to think that you are nurturing some author to greatness, that you're establishing a bond that will join your experience with their talent. Thus, all your comments are worth their weight in gold.

But no.

The editor is only to offer suggestions, and a good author will pick and choose which suggestions they want to use.

4. Don't: Point out each and every instance of a recurring, non-grammatical problem

It is easy for an author to feel editorially assaulted, so avoid belaboring issues.

Back when I graded papers, I used a green or purple pen because students really did hate the "my paper is bleeding" look of red marks all over their pages.

I keep that image in mind when offering editorial suggestions that the author will

probably perceive as criticism. Telling the author over and over that they need to set up their scenes before action occurs, provide more thorough physical descriptions of their characters, or be less wordy will be more likely lead to resentment than to revision.

Instead of jumping on every instance of a problem, point out the issue at the first, best opportunity, and then cover it again in the final notes, if you feel it would be helpful. You might allude to it again, briefly, in a strategic location or two, but then let it go.

For example, say the novel does not have a single non-visual image. After pointing out that people experience the world through five senses, you might wait until something explodes to ask, "Does this feel hot to the hero?" or a scene where a dark tomb is opened to ask, "Does the tomb smell bad?"

5. Don't: Check out mentally because the work isn't that great

Okay, here's a trade secret. This one never stops being a challenge, but if you want to earn your paycheck, suck it up.

Some novels are lovely, some dreadful, and most somewhere in between. It is never acceptable to give the work less than your full attention, and any sort of skimming is absolutely forbidden, even – especially – on the second or later read.

If you already have incredible concentration and can plow through pages without blinking, good for you. But most of us will find that our focus can waver.

Some tips:

- Break up the work with small chores, a little solitaire, a mini-workout, making some soup, or whatever else will thoroughly distract you. Of course, you have to keep the breaks short, so don't do anything too enthralling.
- Take one of these breaks when you feel your attention wandering, not according to the clock. You should find the work periods growing longer

over time.

- Never edit when you're sleepy, emotionally upset, or tipsy.
- Have at least one really good place to work free of distractions, whether at home or the coffee shop or some other clean, well-lighted place.
- Remind yourself from time to time that you are being paid and the client will evaluate you based solely on the quality of your finished product.

6. Don't: Use humor

Most people find humor soothing in social situations, but the relationship between editor and author, as mentioned above, is not a social one. Moreover, humor usually requires ambiguity, the gap between what is said and what is actually meant.

At best, an editor's joke might make the author creak out an uncomfortable smile, so why take the risk of annoying and even angering your client?

Keep comments serious, literal, and straightforward. And no emoticons.

7. Don't: Contradict the work without support

It's not just the author's research that matters, but yours as well. While you're expected to be an expert on grammar, style, etc., telling an author they're wrong about a scientific, academic, or business matter may cause them to reject your suggestion out of hand.

The rule here is to provide a source beyond your own say-so, even when the mistake seems "obvious" to you. Recommend a book on a subject if you know one, and online sources are great, as long as you stay away from student essays and Wikipedia. (Yes, there's lots of good stuff on Wikipedia, but there's a lot of garbage

too.)

Along these lines, while pointing out gaps in logic can be helpful, never argue with the author's philosophy. However much you are tempted to debate whether life begins at conception, or if Global Warming is a myth, or if hatred is healthy, you must remember that the only opinion the author wants from you is on the quality of their work.

8. Don't: Cut-and-paste generic comments

Someone looking for general comments on how to write can go buy a book. If you're being paid for your personal opinion on someone's specific work, it had better look personal and specific. "The pace is slow" is not good enough. Say instead, "When Gerald explains how he makes different cocktails for different kinds of women, the information is interesting, but it really slows down the pace of the scene."

While it is true that you will repeat yourself often when dealing with various writers, don't allow yourself to "save time" by copying an old comment and pasting it in the margins of your current assignment. Trust me, it will show, and your client will be, rightfully, annoyed.

9. Don't: Fail to acknowledge when you use personal taste

Remember the importance of being transparent? It's just impossible not to put your own preferences into your editorial suggestions at some point, so embrace it. When you feel the need to suggest a change based on your reaction as a reader, rather than because of a "mistake," you should acknowledge this to your client.

After all, it may be that your personal taste reflects the general tastes and trends of readers out there. I've run into quite a few novels where the female characters are

loathsome whores, complete idiots, hapless victims, or otherwise one-dimensional, unmotivated stereotypes. As a woman, I don't care for that, and I'm fairly certain I'm not alone.

(To be fair, I don't like those kinds of male characters either, but my response is usually less visceral.)

In such situations, I tell the client that I'm finding the sexist/racist character unpleasant to read (personal reaction) only before I point out that such characters go against current trends in popular literature (market value).

Of course, if the intended market for a novel is going to like sexist/racist characters, then one's personal taste may well need to be muzzled.

One of oddest novels I ever had to edit pretended to be gay porn. In truth, it was disguised as gay porn to warn gay men that being gay would lead to their death and damnation. Did I like this message? No, but that's not important. "Being gay is being damned by God" was the point of the novel, and I made my comments about characterization and plot appropriately.

10. Don't: Blatantly lie

Okay, so you absolutely hate what you're working on, but you don't want to end your editing career. Despite all temptation, don't fake rapture and pretend everything's fine.

Find those authorial strengths if you have to use a flashlight and microscope.

Think about the effort and passion it takes to write a novel, the commitment the author has to saying something to the world.

Ultimately, you must give the author the information they need to improve the novel, but keep your inner diplomat on his toes. No matter what problems need to be addressed, the author must feel your comments are helpful and encouraging (better words, I think, than "constructive").

Before you begin

So now that we understand what an editor does and does not do, the final section of this paper will address the chronological process of editing. Knowing how many different things are expected from the editor, the best approach is to break the work down into steps, focusing on various issues as they arise.

Know your tools.

The most popular editing software is the Microsoft Office Suite because it does a good job of tracking changes and facilitates group work on a document. If you use different software, such as Adobe Pro, your client will still expect to be able to see your changes.

The dangers of "spellcheck" are legend, but it is a highly useful tool as long as you remember that it will only assist in finding errors and is no substitute for careful reading. The latest version occasionally catches homonyms, such as "there/their," but never rely on that.

The dictionary is also quite limited, so whenever you have a technical, medical, or otherwise jargon-heavy novel, it will point out quite a few "misspellings" that are just words it doesn't recognize.

Get together a nice set of Websites with medical and technical dictionaries, and don't hesitate to Google for words that have only recently become popular, such as "denosumab," or for jargon, such as "nonlinear static pushover analysis."

As for the grammar tool in spellcheck, be very careful. It's often quite wrong, particularly in claiming that perfectly lovely sentences are fragments and in its hatred of reflective pronouns. It's best to take all grammar-check notations as suggestions that something may be wrong. It may be right only one time in fifty, but that's more than worth your time when you need to catch 99.99% of all errors.

Your use of the tool should reflect how you best work. I have developed the following sequence:

1. Read through the document once with spellcheck on but the grammar-check turned off.
2. Run a spellcheck on the document with all functions of spellcheck turned on but always checking the section in question for myself.
3. Run searches for specific errors the author favors.
4. Read through the document again with spellcheck on but the grammar-check turned off.
5. Run a spellcheck on the document with all functions of spellcheck turned on but always checking the section in question for myself.
6. Repeat 4 & 5 as necessary.

The tool that tracks changes is usually set to the default where deleted words are in red with a strike-through. This is really distracting. I recommend setting the options to hide deletions and show insertions in color without underlines, as they tend to block your view of commas and periods.

Another tool you need to know is the stylebook, and you should amass your own library of them, such as *The Chicago Manual of Style* and *The Modern Language Association Handbook*. **When in doubt, look it up!**

Finally, in addition to your knowledge of genres and basic professionalism, you may need to refer to specific submission guidelines, usually provided to you by the author or available on an agent/publisher's Website.

Don't try to do it all at once

As always, you need to adapt the process to your comfort, but the main idea is to understand you can't do everything that needs to be done in one read. Instead, try

on that first read-through to 1) concentrate on grammar and mechanics, because the number of times you read through the document will decrease your ability to find errors, and 2) provide honest first-time reader response.

Special issues of formatting/stylebook/submission guidelines can easily be regulated to the second read-through, and this keeps you from having to refer to other documents during that first read-through.

The second (and third, fourth...) read will continue to search for and destroy grammatical errors, and don't forget to check out your own corrections especially well.

During that first read-through, don't spend time explaining the details of your emotional responses, as they will pull you out of the work. Make comments only for yourself, with such quick-and-dirty notes as:

- This makes no sense.
- I like that!
- Too much stuff here.
- I can totally see it coming.
- There's no way this book is going to wrap everything up in five pages.

On the second read, take these notes you wrote for your eyes only and replace them with such comments as:

- Because the reader does not yet know that this character is under a magic spell, they will be confused when he doesn't defend himself.
- The imagery here really allows the reader to feel what it's like to ride in a race car.
- This is a lot of exposition for the reader to take in all at once. You might think about breaking up this exposition over the next few scenes.
- The reader knows by now the killer is a woman. Why doesn't the hero know?
- Considering that this work sets up a sequel, you might leave the

introduction of the love interest until the next book.

Remember, if you make a comment on the first read that later you decide isn't helpful, you can just delete it.

Other things that can be briefly noted in the first read and then fully dealt with on the second read include wordiness, commentary about generic expectations, defining the novel's purpose, and freshness of concept. In fact, when scrutinizing plot elements, pace, and character development, it can be a great help to know how things end.

Ready to edit?

This book has hopefully explained the major challenges of editing the novel so that you can decide whether you're ready to self-edit or want to hire a professional. Also, should you hire Edit911.com or another company to do the work, you now know what to expect.

If you decide to self-edit, you must first give yourself time to get the emotional distance you need to evaluate your writing as well as time to get the distance you need to evaluate your editing.

If you decide to hire an editor, you know you should get a professional who can give you the information you can use to make your novel as good as it can be.

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